

Punctuating Old English Poetry: Challenges and Strategies

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From its first appearances in the eighth century through to the twelfth century, poetry in English was formatted on the manuscript page as continuous prose—that is, without verse lineation. Early English scribes regularly lineated Latin poetry, and, later, French poetry, but English poetry had a different history and pertained to a different conceptual plane. Consequently, English poetry attracted a different scribal practice. It was only in the thirteenth century, in conjunction with new Latin- and French-influenced English verse forms, that poetry in English came to be lineated in the modern way.

As in other early language traditions, premodern English poetry was written out with very light punctuation. The sparsity of manuscript punctuation appears especially problematic in the period before 1200, when poetry in English lacked visual linebreaks. The difficulties of parsing this poetry are substantial. Modern editors of Old English verse must decide, on a case-by-case basis, where clauses end and how verses relate to one another syntactically.

This paper grapples with the consequences of this situation. The paper has two sections: *Challenges* and *Strategies*. The first section is descriptive, and the second is analytical.

Challenges

Staring at a wall of text in an Old English poetic manuscript brings home our historical alienation from tenth-century England (#1 on your handout). Where do the lines of poetry end? In all modern contexts other than the experimental genre of prose poetry, we expect correspondence between verse and lineation. The earliest English readers applied that expectation to Latin poetry but categorically not to poetry in the vernacular.

In practice, the ends of Old English alliterative lines are rarely in doubt for modern scholars. After three centuries of philological inquiry, our knowledge of the metrical structure of alliterative verse is robust. In a field rife with dissent on basics like authorship and chronology, editors largely agree about where lines end. The editorial consensus has a firm basis in the observable facts of the manuscripts. These facts include poetic formulas, which travel as self-contained units, and manuscript punctuation.

Medieval punctuation is helpful as corroborating evidence for modern punctuation, but it is only a little helpful, because there is only a little bit of it. Actually, it's not clear that more medieval punctuation would solve modern editorial problems. In a few Old English manuscripts, scribes have pursued a thoroughgoing program of metrical punctuation. This punctuation confirms our sense of lines and half-lines but leaves syntax entirely open to interpretation. A scribe who punctuates everything is about as unhelpful to us as a scribe who punctuates nothing.

It's no wonder, then, that certain recurrent syntactical patterns in Old English poetry appear ambiguous. Consider **#2** on your handout:

him se yldesta andswarode
werodes wisa wordhord onleac.

(“The eldest answered him | *the captain of the troop* | (he) unlocked his word-hoard.”)

Here, Beowulf addresses the Danish coastguard. The epithets *se yldesta* ‘the eldest’ and *werodes wisa* ‘captain of the troop’ both refer to Beowulf. Because Old English permits unexpressed subjects and because English alliterative verse abounds in poetic variation of noun phrases, it is unclear whether *werodes wisa* is the subject of *andswarode* ‘answered’ or of *onleac* ‘unlocked.’ An editor might punctuate in one of two ways. These are **#3a** and **#3b** on your handout. Though **#3a** may sound unidiomatic to you, know that it is fully in keeping with English alliterative poetic style. In fact, **#3a** is the more

straightforward interpretation; **#3b** instances a less common syntax. The point is that both are plausible.

In **#2**, a subject was sandwiched between two verbs without any definite indication of its syntactical affiliation. In some other cases, the ambiguous verse contains an adjective. This is **#4** on your handout:

wigbord scinon
beab ofer haledum holmweall astah.

(“The shields [=walls of water] shone | *high over the warriors* | the seawall rose.”)

Here, the Israelites are making their escape from Egypt over the parted Red Sea. In this imaginative rendering of the scene, the walls of water metaphorically appear as ramparts of shields. Is it the *wigbord* ‘shields,’ i.e., ‘walls of water’ or the *holmweall* ‘seawall’ that is *beab* ‘high’? The adjective *beab* does not inflect for number. It could be singular or plural. This passage, too, might be punctuated in one of two ways. These are **#5a** and **#5b** on your handout. Both are syntactical patterns in evidence elsewhere in Old English poetry.

There are still other passages with direct and indirect objects ambiguously sandwiched between two verbs. I’ll leave those to your imagination.

To editors, these passages have seemed like textual problems. In a moment, I’ll argue that they are really literary features. Whether problems or features, they are very numerous. After combing through *Andreas*, *Beowulf*, *Daniel*, *Elene*, *Exodus*, and many shorter Old English poems, I have noticed some 330 instances.

Strategies

I observed that **#2** on your handout seemed to raise the question, Is *werodes wisa* the subject of *andswarode* or of *onleac*?—or more generally, To which verb does the subject pertain? I submit that this is a wrongheaded question. The relationship between verse 259a and the half-lines surrounding it is not ‘either . . . or’ but ‘first . . . then.’ First *werodes wisa* is the subject of *andswarode*; then it is reinterpreted as the subject of *onleac*. First the syntax in **#3a** on your handout obtains, then the second verb arrives, and the syntax in **#3b** obtains. Any contemporary reader or listener familiar with the conventions of English poetic syntax would have discerned in the passage a formal device. My name for this device is the syntactical reversal.

Perhaps Beowulf’s movement from the first verb to the second highlights the dynamism of his public speech. Or perhaps, like poetic variation, it serves him up from different perspectives, first as a respondent and then as the possessor of a word-hoard. Probably some particular effect was sought, and for a well-versed audience it may have hit home, even if we no longer “catch our breath at the places where the breath was always caught” (to quote A. E. Housman in Stoppard’s *Invention of Love*).

In comparison to previous treatments of these problem passages, my solution implies a different conception of syntax. Editors typically seek to punctuate clauses and sentences, but the existence of these units in English alliterative verse—or, more precisely, the validity of these units in interpretation of English alliterative verse—is debatable. The half-line or verse is really the intrinsic unit of alliterative poetry. The half-line drops grammatical elements into conversation with one another *seriatim*, like so many seashells in a bucket. Moving from clauses to verses and from a spatial to a temporal understanding of syntax, it becomes possible to appreciate syntactical reversals as effects purposefully offered to a medieval audience, not problems accidentally offered to a modern

editor. If this interpretation is correct, passages like **#2** illustrate the inappropriateness of expecting Old English poetic syntax to mirror the syntax of everyday spoken language and the inadequacy of arguing probabilistically about poetics, as editors like to do. Much of the artistry of alliterative verse occurs in the space between half-lines, a fact that clause-minded punctuation obfuscates.

My argument is broadly phenomenological. Whether read or heard, poetry occurs in time. Conceptualized in temporal terms, poetic syntax is not an objectively knowable map of an unchanging terrain but an event that occurs in the minds of poets and audiences. A phenomenological interpretation of syntax allows the temporal nature of reading or listening to emerge as an essential feature rather than an analytical inconvenience.

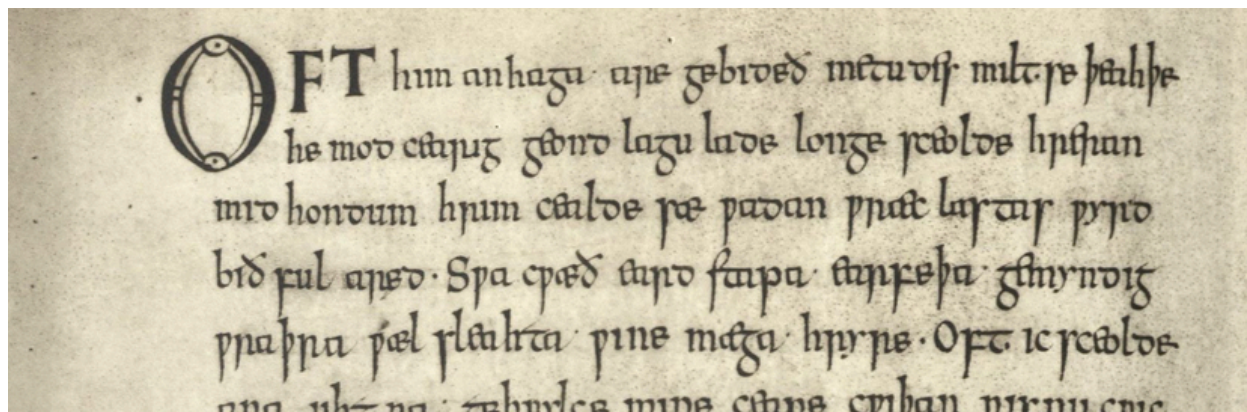
Medieval people were perhaps especially aware of the temporal aspect of the reading or listening experience. “But how is the future diminished or consumed,” mused Augustine in *Confessions*, “when it does not yet exist?” He was thinking of long and short Latin syllables in sequence. Writing over 800 years later, Snorri Sturluson in his *Skáldskaparmál* also affirms the time-bound nature of reading. Here’s how he describes double entendre in skaldic verse: “These distinctions [between meanings] can be used in poetry so as to create wordplay that is difficult to understand, if a different distinction must be taken from the one that the previous line seemed to indicate before.” Closer to home, the bawdy double entendres of Anglo-Latin and Old English riddles presuppose a phenomenological experience of the literary text. The reader of the riddle arrives at the ‘incorrect,’ lewd interpretation before realizing the ‘correct,’ pious interpretation.

We should edit Old English texts so as to enable modern readers to share such experiences. In the case of passages like **#2** and **#4**, that means devising a system of punctuation, or non-punctuation, that respects the integrity of the syntactical reversal.

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1. *The Wanderer*, Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501 ('Exeter Book')



2. A noun sandwiched between two verbs

Beowulf 258-59 him se yldesta andswarode
werodes wisa wordhord onleac.

("The eldest answered him | *the captain of the troop* | (he) unlocked his word-hoard.")

3. *Beowulf* 258-59, punctuated two ways

(a) Him se yldesta andswarode,
werodes wisa. Wordhord onleac.

("The eldest, the captain of the troop, answered him. He unlocked his word-hoard.")

(b) Him se yldesta andswarode.
Werodes wisa wordhord onleac.

("The eldest answered him. The captain of the troop unlocked his word-hoard.")

4. An adjective sandwiched between two verbs

Exodus 467b-68 wigbord scinon
beah ofer bæledum holmweall astah.

("The shields [=walls of water] shone | *high over the warriors* | the seawall rose.")

5. *Exodus* 467b-68, punctuated two ways

- (a) Wigbord scinon
 heah ofer hæleðum. Holmweall astah.
 (“The shields [=walls of water] shone high over the warriors. The seawall rose.”)
- (b) Wigbord scinon.
 Heah ofer hæleðum holmweall astah.
 (“The shields [=walls of water] shone. High over the warriors, the seawall rose.”)

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